DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 103 UD 022 902

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TITLE	School Learning and Corporation-School Alliances. ERIC/CUE Fact Sheet Number 16.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE	Apr 83
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (free).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Communication Problems; *Cooperative Programs; Educational Attitudes; *Educational Cooperation; Educational Objectives; Education Work Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; Literature Reviews; *School Business Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Fact Sheets; PF Project

ABSTRACT

Business has begun to play a more active role in education, spurred on by the need of education to obtain alternate sources of funding and by the desire of business to reduce youth unemployment and educational deficiencies. Research has shown that a communication gap exists among business executives, educators, and students. Some corporation-school cooperative programs which have been developed in response to the gap are: (1) Education-Work Councils or Industry-Education-Labor Councils; (2) business executives serving on school boards; (3) businesses providing curriculum materials; (4) the Adopt-a-School program; (5) foundations created by corporations; (6) teacher-industry exchange programs; and (7) work-study programs. It has been argued that the increased role of business in the schools will have no ill effects, but some concerns which have been voiced are the possible acceptance of a corporate ideology, a shifting of the blame for declining worker productivity to the schools, a lack of guidelines and accountability for programs, and a change in educational priorities. Further development is needed in the areas of business-school communication, parent and community involvement, improved competency tests, and clarification of the goals of education. (DC)

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ERIC/CUE Fact Sheet Number 16

April 1983

School Learning and Corporation-School Alliances

ED234103

For some years, business has been involved in public education, both by making available free educational materials for the classroom and by participating in government-subsidized work-study and other training programs. Recently, as federal support for education has declined, new corporation-school alliances have begun to emerge in which businesses play a more active role. Although educators have traditionally resisted the idea of interference from the business world, many appear to be putting aside their objections in the hope of much needed assistance.

On the corporate side, the reasons to enter more deeply into the life of public schooling are diverse: Corporate leadership is worried about the stability of urban communities with their troubled, deteriorating schools and high dropout rates. Businesses need a stable community base for their activity; they want well-trained employees who will stay on the job, a community environment that receives them with good will, and reasonable school-related taxation. Although some theorists believe that our current economy contains structural youth unemployment, business assumes that better prepared students will increase the number of employable youth and thus the number of jobs and productivity. Finally, with the decline of semiskilled jobs, the basic skills needed even for entry-level positions have become more complicated, and skill deficiencies limit workers' productivity. Many corporations now offer their own basic skills courses for inadequately prepared high school graduates. An increasingly common corporate view, however, is that business needs to become more involved in making sure that schools teach such basic skills as reading, writing, listening and recall, as well as habits of punctuality, neatness and responsibility essential for work.

A Communication Gap

In a recent survey by the Center for Public Resources (Henry 1982), business executives and educators agreed on the importance of reading, writing, reasoning, and speaking/listening as necessary skills for entry-level employment. But while business executives generally viewed some knowledge in math and science as a basic skill for employment, school personnel did not. Moreover, while most educators saw their students as adequately prepared in all basic skills but writing, company executives complained of serious deficiencies in every area.

Whatever is being communicated between business executives and educators does not reach students who apparently have different ideas. According to a study by Mann (1982) of urban minority youth's "expectations about skills needed on the job," most recognized that employers want high school diplomas; yet only a few mentioned literacy as important. Office skills were cited most frequently as important, followed by "people skills" and mathematics. Thirteen percent thought "nothing needs to be known to hold a job."

Some Cooperative Programs

To solve problems in communication as well as to work toward joint resolution of educational problems, a number of cooperative enterprises are developing between corporate and educational communities.

- *Education-Work Councils* and *Industry-Education-Labor Councils* were begun in the 1970s and are the most common form of communication and collaboration between public schools and the private sector. These autonomous, action-oriented councils now exist in over 100 cities. They may include government, business, labor, community groups, and school people as equal partners, and all seek to identify educational issues related to improving education, particularly as it relates to the transition to work.
- Although businesses usually avoid controversial issues such as desegregation or community politics, some local corporations are placing executives on *school boards* to assist in policymaking.
- For a number of years, corporations have contributed to the school curriculum through *educational materials* such as free booklets, films, cassettes and other audiovisual materials on communications, economics, ecology and business. Although such materials are controversial and often considered largely pro-business in their views, in an era of tight public monies they are a burgeoning form of corporate intervention. For educators who are uneasy about judging corporation-sponsored materials, there are some guides. In energy education, for instance, the National Council for Social Studies and the National Science Teachers Association have established guidelines for selecting industry-sponsored materials.
- A relatively new, popular form of business assistance is the *Adopt-a-School Program*, which creates ties between a school or school district, and a business. (Sometimes civic or religious groups also adopt schools.) Businesses typically offer school management studies, advisory committees, and specific program recommendations as well as job placement services, pamphlets, speakers, classroom demonstrations, field trips to local companies, and the initiation and sponsorship of entire programs. These types of assistance have generally not been documented or evaluated according to scholarly standards. There is also some concern that the business "parent" may too easily be able to determine priorities, and that the programs may provide businesses with good public relations without offering schools significant aid. Since some schools and districts are asserting that "any group can adopt a school," a question also arises as to whether all groups and businesses are equally appropriate "parents."
- Recently, corporations are joining together to create *foundations* that fund specific local school improvement programs in an effort to replace some of the lost federal dollars. Most of these foundations give money to projects, not to a general school budget, and, therefore, have the capacity to influence which programs will survive and thrive.
- Several cities have developed *exchange programs* in which a teacher spends several weeks in industry and becomes familiar with the basic skills necessary in the workplace while an employee of that industry joins the school staff, learns about

UD 022902

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the school system, and offers some teaching. These programs are said to generate mutual interest and understanding.

- *Work-study programs* are among the most widespread types of business-school cooperation. Increasingly, attention is given to ensure that both working and classroom time are spent on developing basic skills. However, it has been argued that some training programs may encourage students to drop out of school and accept low-paying, dead-end jobs rather than increase their skills.

Lessons from Recent Experience

Until now, corporation-school alliances have not been monitored or systematically studied. Thus most lessons to be learned from existing programs are impressionistic, and recommendations are consistent with good planning in any area. Commitment and authority on the part of the school superintendent and the executive officer, sufficient time and resources for planning, built-in evaluations, good screening devices, and appropriate materials are among the advice given.

One issue does come up again and again, both as an implied question and in heated debate: Does giving business a greater role in schools shift the values and priorities of education? There are those who read the new cooperative experience as pointing in the direction of an often mindless acceptance of business priorities and a corporate point of view. On the other side some argue that business people are responsible and necessary members of the community, and that there need be no conflict between others' needs and views and theirs.

Sources of Concern

Reasons for skepticism about any increased business-education alliance exist not only in the education and corporate worlds, but also in the social policy community.

Many *business people* still believe that it is the school's responsibility to ensure that students master the basic skills, and that schooling have practical and vocational outcomes prominent among others.

Many *educators*, scarred by a decade of heavy criticism which came in great part from the business community, are leery of being saddled with the potentially unrealistic mission of reversing trends in declining worker productivity. Some believe that the success of schooling should not be measured by students' productivity in the corporate economy, and that knowledge shouldn't be measured by a quantifiable, pragmatic, marketable end. Educators also note that, until now, actual corporate investment in public education has been extremely small, and that, despite the corporate view that workers need basic skills, most of the little money that is spent on curriculum, in fact, goes to career or vocational education, not to basic skills. Some educators also worry that materials provided by corporations that have their own market and ideological biases may easily impede the development of necessary consumer skepticism and criticism. Finally, school personnel are wary because thus far most business intervention programs have no guidelines, are not accountable to the school community, and do not offer parents, teachers, or students any choice about which corporations will adopt them.

School policy experts fear that cooperative ventures of schools and industry imply that all that is needed to be employable are the skills of a high school graduate. They point out that interventions to upgrade basic skills are carried out in the context of large-scale structural unemployment among minority youth, recessionary and inflationary problems, regional differences in employment opportunities, racial segmentation of the job market, and ethnic differences in attitudes toward employment—all of which complicate the possibility of any neat match between the academic and vocational qualifications of public school graduates and presumed opportunities for employment.

Need for Further Development

- Even skeptical educators and business executives agree that the importance of basic skills mastery for both entry-level employment and job advancement should be communicated to school personnel and students. In the corporate view, math and science should be especially stressed.
- Both business executives and school personnel stress the need for more parental involvement in the school process to help emphasize the importance of basic skills and education in general.
- Educators suggest improved tests and screening devices to determine competency, and the involvement of all interested groups in the community in planning the basic skills curriculum.
- The literature on both sides makes clear the crucial need to clarify the goals of education in a democratic society.

—Carol Ascher, Ph.D.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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